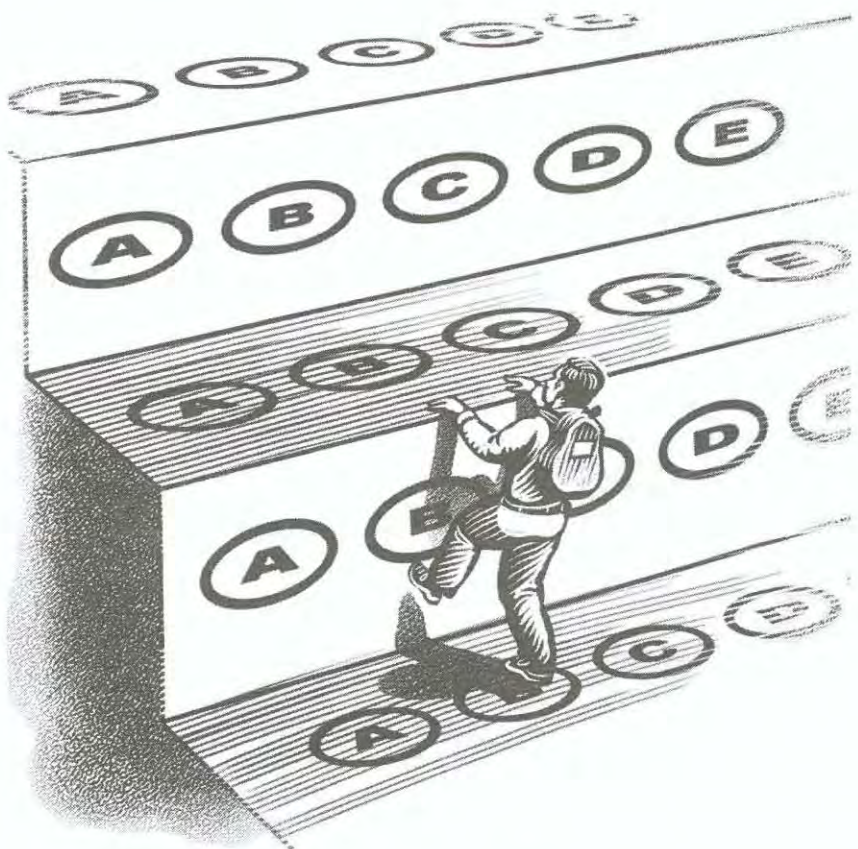
Just about any kid who is academically ready for college can find the money to go

The Embarrassing Good News on College Access

By GREG FORSTER



Which obstacle blocks students more from making a successful transition from school to college: preparation or financial need? That is an underlying question that runs through many debates about how high-school students move on to higher education—or don't move on. *The Chronicle* asked two scholars to give their views.

HERE'S some good news about American education that you won't hear from the public-school establishment: There's almost no gap between the number of college-ready high-school graduates and the number of students starting college. Virtually everyone who is academically qualified to go to college actually goes to college.

The establishment is embarrassed by that good news because it implies some very bad news: We can expect college attendance to remain low, and the racial gap in college attendance to remain large, until we get serious about reforming K-12 education.

College access is one of the most serious issues we face in reforming the transition from high school to college. Researchers agree that a college education leads to better life outcomes, and that college access must be part of any serious approach to redressing social inequalities.

Unfortunately, too few students are currently able to attend college. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2002 there were slightly more than four million young people who were the right age to be starting college for the first time. But the Department of Education reports that only 1.4 million students entered four-year colleges for the first time that year: a roughly 35-percent rate of attendance.

Further, attendance rates for minority students are substantially lower than for white students. Education Department and census numbers for 2001 show us that approximately 37 percent of the white population, 26 percent of the black population, and 15 percent of the Hispanic population enrolled in four-year institutions when they reached the age to do so. We can't hope to achieve equality with those numbers.

The issue's urgency is sometimes obscured by statistics showing widespread access to "postsecondary" education, which includes institutions like community colleges and job-training and vocational programs. While those are an important part of our educational system, the public cares most about access to four-year colleges, and rightly so. They are the economic and cultural gateway that Americans want their children to be able to walk through.

Where does the problem lie? Many people assume that lack of money is the most important barrier to college. Certainly college isn't cheap. According to the Education Department, in 2003-4 the average cost of tuition, room, and board was more than $10,700 at public colleges and over $25,200 at private ones.

But that doesn't automatically mean money is the most important obstacle to college. Millions of dollars in financial aid help students meet those costs. In 2003-4, 76 percent of full-time students in four-year public colleges and 89 percent in private colleges were receiving some kind of aid.

Even if we set aside student loans, we still find that 59 percent of students in public colleges and 82 percent in private colleges were receiving outright grants—free money.

And that aid was not stingy. The average total grant income for full-time students receiving grants was $5,600, and the average loan income was $6,200. Together, that covered the full annual cost of the average public college—with work-study and other forms of financial aid extra.

There were moderate differences among racial groups in the sizes of grants, but not loans: In 1999-2000 white students got total grants of about $5,000, on average, compared with $4,700 for black students and $4,200 for Hispanic students. Differences of that magnitude, however, cannot explain the larger differences in college attendance between minority and white students. If money were the problem, the average total aid given to black and Hispanic students would be more than enough to raise college-attendance rates well above the levels we're seeing.

Money is not the barrier to college. The number of students who could otherwise attend but do not do so because of a lack of funds is not zero, but it is relatively small. The evidence indicates that the vast majority of students who don't attend college are kept out by academic barriers, not financial ones.

Almost all colleges set minimum academic requirements for applicants, and students who don't meet them are excluded. Researchers examining the relative importance of financial and academic barriers to college have developed methods of measuring "college readiness." In the past, such studies have relied on test scores from college-entrance examinations like the SAT—an inadequate method for the obvious reason that most students who aren't college ready don't take such tests in the first place.

MOST RECENT STUDIES use another method, developed by the Education Department, that relies primarily on scores from standardized tests that are administered to the general student population, grade-point averages, or class ranks. But that doesn't reflect the way colleges actually evaluate students.

The Education Department method allows students to use their highest academic indicator—if your grades look better than your test scores, this approach disregards your test scores and looks only at your grades. And students can be considered college ready even if they don't have any academic courses on their transcripts. By contrast, colleges look at all of your academic indicators—if your grades are high but your test scores low, colleges are more likely to trust the test scores—and they don't even look at your application if you didn't take academic course work.

Jay P. Greene, who heads the department of education reform at the

University of Arkansas, has developed a method that accurately reflects the real academic prerequisites for college. It considers students college ready if they have graduated from high school, taken the minimum academic course work required by almost all colleges (four years of English, three of math, two of science, two of social science, and two of a foreign language), and scored at the "basic" level or higher on the English portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Any student who fails one of those three criteria will not be admitted to the vast majority of American colleges.

Analyzing data from the Department of Education, Greene and Marcus A. Winters find that out of all students who started public high schools in the fall of 1998, only 34 percent graduated college ready with the class of 2002. The remainder either dropped out of high school (29 percent) or graduated but lacked the academic prerequisites for applying to college (37 percent).

Private-school graduates probably have higher college-readiness rates, but those students constitute too small a portion of the population to change the overall numbers substantially.

So the college-readiness rate (34 percent) matched the college-attendance rate (35 percent) almost exactly. That indicates that financial barriers are not preventing a substantial number of academically qualified students from attending college. There simply isn't a substantial number of academically qualified students who aren't attending college.

THE DATA divided by racial group tell a similar story, with one caveat. Greene and Winters find that black students have a college-readiness rate of 23 percent. That's actually somewhat below the college-attendance rate of black students of 26 percent. There are several possible explanations: Those students may be among the few who manage to attend college even without the standard qualifications, or there may be a small measurement error. In any event, it is clear that there is no substantial population of black students who are academically qualified for college but don't go.

Hispanic students are the caveat. Their college-readiness rate is 20 percent, compared with a college-attendance rate of 15 percent. That means that there is a small but nontrivial population of Hispanic students who are qualified to attend college but don't go. So in the case of Hispanic students, it is reasonable to conclude that financial barriers may play a small role in keeping students out of college.

However, the 5 percent of Hispanic students who might be kept out by financial barriers must be compared with the 80 percent of Hispanic students who are definitely kept out by academic barriers. By any reasonable standard, money is not the major obstacle to Hispanic college access.

The financial barrier to college attendance has been overcome. Just about any kid who is academically ready for college can go. Why hasn't everyone heard the good news? Why is the education establishment silent? It seems like the same people who complain the loudest that the American education system gets no credit for its successes have been neglecting to mention one of the few real, tangible successes it has actually produced.

The reason, of course, is that the news focuses attention on the embarrassing academic failure of the K-12-education system. A full two-thirds of American students are disqualified from college, regardless of financial considerations, because they lack the academic qualifications needed to attend college. Sad to say, any attempt to improve college access that does not focus on major K-12 reform is a waste of time.

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